

**ROLE OF PUBLIC
HEALTH OFFICIALS**

State and local health agencies monitor plague activity throughout the State. Rangers, park staff, and others are trained to watch for sick or dead rodents or other evidence that plague may be active in a particular area and to report their findings to health authorities.

Health authorities institute preventive measures when plague is found in areas where people are. Look for and heed posted warning signs. After careful evaluation, health authorities may temporarily close the affected area to conduct flea control.

Additional information on plague and other vector-borne diseases can be obtained from your local health department.

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**FACTS ABOUT
PLAGUE
IN CALIFORNIA**



California Ground Squirrel

Plague is a highly infectious bacterial disease which affects primarily rodents. Humans and other animals (especially cats) can get plague if they visit or live in areas where wild rodents are naturally infected. **Plague is endemic (naturally occurring) in California.**

Historically, plague caused millions of deaths throughout Europe in the 6th Century (the Plague of Justinian) and again in the 14th Century (the Black Death). Today, plague in humans is rare and can be treated successfully with modern antibiotics. However, it is

important that the disease be diagnosed and treated early. If not, the infection can spread to the blood and lungs and be fatal and transmitted from person to person.

EXPOSURE TO PLAGUE

People can get plague from animals in several ways. The most important routes of transmission are:

1. BITES OF FLEAS FROM INFECTED RODENTS



Hungry fleas will leave a sick or dead rodent to bite another animal and may readily bite people.

2. DIRECT CONTACT WITH SICK RODENTS.



The bacteria in the blood or other body fluids of an infected animal can enter through cuts and scrapes

on the skin or through the eyes, nose and mouth.

3. PET INVOLVEMENT. (1) Cats with plague pneumonia can spread the bacteria when they cough or sneeze. (2) Dogs and cats can bring infected rodent fleas into the home or campsite.

RISK OF PLAGUE

Plague in California occurs in the foothills, mountains and coastal mountain areas (shaded areas on map). Plague is absent from the southeastern desert and the Central Valley.

Wild rodents in rural areas are the principal source of plague in California. The last known human cases of rat-associated plague in urban areas occurred in Los Angeles in the 1920s. Plague is most common in the rural and undeveloped mountains, as well as the suburban foothills of some larger cities. You can minimize your exposure to plague in these areas by carefully following the precautions listed in this pamphlet.

WHICH ANIMALS CARRY PLAGUE?



The most important wild rodents that can carry plague are ground squirrels, chipmunks, woodrats, mice, and marmots. Plague is deadly to many rodents; therefore, sick or dead rodents are a warning that plague may be in

the area. Other wild animals -- especially rabbits, carnivores (coyote, bobcat, badger, bear, gray fox, and raccoon), and wild pigs -- can also acquire plague but cannot transmit plague to people.

Domestic animals can acquire plague and pose a direct threat to humans. Dogs rarely become ill, but cats are highly susceptible and can suffer a severe illness. A cat with plague will become very ill, may stop eating, and will have a fever. Swollen lymph nodes may occur, generally in the neck area.

Ways to Protect Yourself From Plague

General Precautions

- Use caution when handling a sick pet that has been in a plague area, especially a cat. Avoid close face-to-face contact. Consult a veterinarian and inform them that the animal has been in a plague area.
- Avoid all contact with rodents and their fleas. Do not touch sick or dead rodents. Report them to rangers or health authorities.

Where You Live

- Keep rodent populations down around homes and other inhabited areas. Prevent them from entering buildings. As much as possible, remove, or deny rodents access to, any source of food or shelter.
- Minimize pet contact with rodents and their fleas. Protect pets with flea control products. Consult your veterinarian for effective flea control methods.

Where You Work or Play

- Do not camp, sleep, or rest near animal burrows.

- Do not feed rodents in campgrounds and picnic areas. Store food and garbage in rodent-proof containers.
- Wear long pants tucked into boot tops to reduce your exposure to fleas. Apply insect repellent to socks and trouser cuffs.
- LEAVE PETS AT HOME if possible. If not, keep pet confined or on a leash. Do not allow pets to approach sick or dead rodents or to explore rodents burrows. Protect pets with flea control products.

SYMPTOMS OF PLAGUE

In humans, the initial symptoms of plague include fever, chills, muscle aches, weakness, and, commonly, swollen and tender lymph nodes (called “buboes”). This form is called bubonic plague.

Contact a physician immediately if you become ill within 7 days of being in a plague area (see map).

Plague is readily treatable when diagnosed early. You can help with the diagnosis by telling your doctor where you have been and what you have done that may have exposed you to plague.

If it is not diagnosed early, bubonic plague can progress to septicemic plague (bloodstream infection) and/or pneumonic plague (lung infection). Successful treatment is difficult at these stages.

Do not feed or touch rodents